

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS
DALLAS DIVISION

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATION OF THE UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE

Petitioner James Dean Parker, at the time a Texas prisoner, filed, in the Southern District of Texas, a *pro se* application for writ of habeas corpus under 28 U.S.C. § 2254, challenging his Johnson County conviction for possession of a controlled substance enhanced by a prior conviction. *See* Dkt. Nos. 1 & 2. His case was transferred to this Court. *See* Dkt. No. 4. The State responded to the petition. *See* Dkt. No. 50. Parker replied. *See* Dkt. No. 51. His action was referred to the undersigned United States magistrate judge for pretrial management under 28 U.S.C. § 636(b) and a standing order of reference from United States District Judge Jane J. Boyle. And the undersigned enters these findings of fact, conclusions of law, and recommendation that the Court should deny Parker's federal habeas application.

Legal Standards

“Federal habeas features an intricate procedural blend of statutory and caselaw authority.” *Adekeye v. Davis*, 938 F.3d 678, 682 (5th Cir. 2019). In the district

court, this process begins (and often ends) with the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 (“AEDPA”), under which “state prisoners face strict procedural requirements and a high standard of review.” *Adekeye*, 938 F.3d at 682 (citation omitted). And, under AEDPA, where a state court has already rejected a claim on the merits, a federal court may grant habeas relief on that claim only if the state court adjudication:

- (1) resulted in a decision that was contrary to, or involved an unreasonable application of, clearly established Federal law, as determined by the Supreme Court of the United States; or
- (2) resulted in a decision that was based on an unreasonable determination of the facts in light of the evidence presented in the State court proceeding.

28 U.S.C. § 2254(d); *see Adekeye*, 938 F.3d at 682 (“Once state remedies are exhausted, AEDPA limits federal relief to cases where the state court’s decision was ‘contrary to, or involved an unreasonable application of, clearly established Federal law, as determined by the Supreme Court of the United States’ or was ‘based on an unreasonable determination of the facts in light of the evidence presented.’” (citation omitted)); *see also Allen v. Vannoy*, 659 F. App’x 792, 798-99 (5th Cir. 2016) (per curiam) (describing Section 2244(d) as “impos[ing] two significant restrictions on federal review of a habeas claim ... ‘adjudicated on the merits in state court proceedings’”).

A state court adjudication on direct appeal is due the same deference under Section 2254(d) as an adjudication in a state post-conviction proceeding. *See, e.g.*, *Dowthitt v. Johnson*, 230 F.3d 733, 756-57 (5th Cir. 2000) (a finding made by the CCA on direct appeal was an “issue ... adjudicated on the merits in state proceedings,” to

be “examine[d] ... with the deference demanded by AEDPA” under “28 U.S.C. § 2254(d)”).

And “[t]he question under AEDPA is not whether a federal court believes the state court’s determination was incorrect but whether that determination was unreasonable – a substantially higher threshold.” *Schrivo v. Landrigan*, 550 U.S. 465, 473 (2007); *see also Sanchez v. Davis*, 936 F.3d 300, 305 (5th Cir. 2019) (“[T]his is habeas, not a direct appeal, so our focus is narrowed. We ask not whether the state court denial of relief was incorrect, but whether it was unreasonable – whether its decision was ‘so lacking in justification’ as to remove ‘any possibility for fairminded disagreement.’” (citation omitted)).

A state court decision is “contrary” to clearly established federal law if “it relies on legal rules that directly conflict with prior holdings of the Supreme Court or if it reaches a different conclusion than the Supreme Court on materially indistinguishable facts.” *Busby v. Dretke*, 359 F.3d 708, 713 (5th Cir. 2004); *see also Lopez v. Smith*, 574 U.S. 1, 2 (2014) (per curiam) (“We have emphasized, time and time again, that the [AEDPA] prohibits the federal courts of appeals from relying on their own precedent to conclude that a particular constitutional principle is ‘clearly established.’” (citation omitted)).

A decision constitutes an “unreasonable application” of clearly established federal law if “the state court identifies the correct governing legal principle from [the Supreme] Court’s decisions but unreasonably applies that principle to the facts of the prisoner’s case.” *Williams v. Taylor*, 529 U.S. 362, 413 (2000); *see also Pierre v.*

Vannoy, 891 F.3d 224, 227 (5th Cir. 2018) (a petitioner’s lack of “Supreme Court precedent to support” a ground for habeas relief “ends [his] case” as to that ground).

“For purposes of § 2254(d)(1), an unreasonable application of federal law is different from an incorrect application of federal law.... A state court’s determination that a claim lacks merit precludes federal habeas relief so long as fairminded jurists could disagree on the correctness of the state court’s decision.” *Harrington v. Richter*, 562 U.S. 86, 101 (2011) (citations and internal quotation marks omitted). “Under § 2254(d), a habeas court must determine what arguments or theories supported or ... could have supported, the state court’s decision; and then it must ask whether it is possible fairminded jurists could disagree that those arguments or theories are inconsistent with the holding in a prior decision of [the Supreme] Court.” *Id.* at 102 (internal quotation marks omitted); *see also Evans v. Davis*, 875 F.3d 210, 216 (5th Cir. 2017) (recognizing that Section 2254(d) tasks courts “with considering not only the arguments and theories the state habeas court actually relied upon to reach its ultimate decision but also all the arguments and theories it could have relied upon” (citation omitted)).

The Supreme Court has further explained that “[e]valuating whether a rule application was unreasonable requires considering the rule’s specificity. The more general the rule, the more leeway courts have in reaching outcomes in case-by-case determinations.” *Richter*, 562 U.S. at 101 (internal quotation marks omitted). And “even a strong case for relief does not mean the state court’s contrary conclusion was unreasonable.” *Id.* at 102. The Supreme Court has explained that, “[i]f this standard

is difficult to meet, that is because it was meant to be,” where, “[a]s amended by AEDPA, § 2254(d) stops short of imposing a complete bar on federal court relitigation of claims already rejected in state proceedings,” but “[i]t preserves authority to issue the writ in cases where there is no possibility fairminded jurists could disagree that the state court’s decision conflicts with this Court’s precedents,” and “[i]t goes no further.” *Id.* Thus, “[a]s a condition for obtaining habeas corpus from a federal court, a state prisoner must show that the state court’s ruling on the claim being presented in federal court was so lacking in justification that there was an error well understood and comprehended in existing law beyond any possibility for fairminded disagreement.” *Id.* at 103; *accord Burt v. Titlow*, 571 U.S. 12, 20 (2013) (“If this standard is difficult to meet – and it is – that is because it was meant to be. We will not lightly conclude that a State’s criminal justice system has experienced the extreme malfunction for which federal habeas relief is the remedy.” (internal quotation marks, brackets, and citations omitted)).

As to Section 2254(d)(2)’s requirement that a petitioner show that the state court adjudication “resulted in a decision that was based on an unreasonable determination of the facts in light of the evidence presented in the State court proceeding,” the Supreme Court has explained that “a state-court factual determination is not unreasonable merely because the federal habeas court would have reached a different conclusion in the first instance” and that federal habeas relief is precluded even where the state court’s factual determination is debatable. *Wood v. Allen*, 558 U.S. 290, 301, 303 (2010). Under this standard, “it is not enough

to show that a state court’s decision was incorrect or erroneous. Rather, a petitioner must show that the decision was objectively unreasonable, a substantially higher threshold requiring the petitioner to show that a reasonable factfinder must conclude that the state court’s determination of the facts was unreasonable.” *Batchelor v. Cain*, 682 F.3d 400, 405 (5th Cir. 2012) (brackets and internal quotation marks omitted).

The Court must presume that a state court’s factual determinations are correct and can find those factual findings unreasonable only where the petitioner “rebut[s] the presumption of correctness by clear and convincing evidence.” 28 U.S.C. § 2254(e)(1); *Gardner v. Johnson*, 247 F.3d 551, 560 (5th Cir. 2001). This presumption applies not only to explicit findings of fact but also “to those unarticulated findings which are necessary to the state court’s conclusions of mixed law and fact.” *Valdez v. Cockrell*, 274 F.3d 941, 948 n.11 (5th Cir. 2001); *see also Ford v. Davis*, 910 F.3d 232, 235 (5th Cir. 2018) (Section 2254(e)(1) “deference extends not only to express findings of fact, but to the implicit findings of the state court.’ As long as there is ‘some indication of the legal basis for the state court’s denial of relief,’ the district court may infer the state court’s factual findings even if they were not expressly made.” (footnotes omitted)).

And “determining whether a state court’s decision resulted from an unreasonable legal or factual conclusion does not require that there be an opinion from the state court explaining the state court’s reasoning.” *Richter*, 562 U.S. at 98; *see also Pondexter v. Dretke*, 346 F.3d 142, 148 (5th Cir. 2003) (“a federal habeas court is authorized by Section 2254(d) to review only a state court’s ‘decision,’ and not the

written opinion explaining that decision” (quoting *Neal v. Puckett*, 286 F.3d 230, 246 (5th Cir. 2002) (en banc) (per curiam)); *Evans*, 875 F.3d at 216 n.4 (even where “[t]he state habeas court’s analysis [is] far from thorough,” a federal court “may not review [that] decision de novo simply because [it finds the state court’s] written opinion ‘unsatisfactory’” (quoting *Neal*, 286 F.3d at 246)).

Section 2254 thus creates a “highly deferential standard for evaluating state court rulings, which demands that state-court decisions be given the benefit of the doubt.” *Woodford v. Visciotti*, 537 U.S. 19, 24 (2002). To overcome this standard, a petitioner must show that “there was no reasonable basis for the state court to deny relief.” *Richter*, 562 U.S. at 98. That is, a petitioner must, in sum, “show, based on the state-court record alone, that any argument or theory the state habeas court could have relied on to deny [him] relief would have either been contrary to or an unreasonable application of clearly established federal law as determined by the Supreme Court.” *Evans*, 875 F.3d at 217.

Analysis

Parker pled guilty to the drug possession charged by the indictment and true to the enhancement contained in the indictment (acknowledging his prior conviction), and he was sentenced to four years of imprisonment. *See* Dkt. No. 49-19 at 8-19. There was no direct appeal. And the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals denied Parker’s state habeas application, *see id.* at 20-48, without written order, *see Ex parte Parker*, WR-49,698-06 (Tex. Crim. App. Sept. 13, 2017) [Dkt. No. 49-18].

Parker first asserts various theories under which he alleges that his trial

counsel was constitutionally ineffective, the first of which is that his counsel coerced him to plead guilty through false information. *See* Dkt. No. 1 at 6. Parker does not specify what information was false, *see generally* Dkt. Nos. 1 & 2, and he has otherwise not shown that his guilty plea was not voluntarily entered.

A guilty plea is valid only if entered voluntarily, knowingly, and intelligently, “with sufficient awareness of the relevant circumstances and likely consequences.” *Bradshaw v. Stumpf*, 545 U.S. 175, 183 (2005). A plea is intelligently made when the defendant has “real notice of the true nature of the charge against him.” *Bousley v. United States*, 523 U.S. 614, 618 (1998) (internal quotation marks omitted). And a plea is “voluntary” if it does not result from force, threats, improper promises, misrepresentations, or coercion. *See United States v. Amaya*, 111 F.3d 386, 389 (5th Cir. 1997).

The United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit has identified three core concerns in a guilty plea proceeding: (1) the absence of coercion; (2) the defendant’s full understanding of the charges; and (3) the defendant’s realistic appreciation of the consequences of the plea. *See United States v. Gracia*, 983 F.2d 625, 627-28 (5th Cir. 1993). These core concerns are addressed by the admonishments contained in article 26.13 of the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure. *See, e.g., Ojena v. Thaler*, No. 3:10-cv-2601-P-BD, 2011 WL 4048514, at *1 & n.1 (N.D. Tex. Aug. 25, 2011), *rec. adopted*, 2011 WL 4056162 (N.D. Tex. Sept. 12, 2011).

But “whether the state trial court followed the statute is nondispositive. Instead, a guilty plea will be upheld on habeas review if it is entered into knowingly,

voluntarily and intelligently.” *Dominguez v. Director, TDCJ-CID*, No. 6:14cv49, 2014 WL 2880492, at *3 (E.D. Tex. June 23, 2014) (citing *Montoya v. Johnson*, 226 F.3d 399, 405 (5th Cir. 2000); *James v. Cain*, 56 F.3d 662, 666 (5th Cir. 1995)). Most applicable to the instant claim, “[t]he ‘knowing’ requirement that a defendant ‘understands the consequences of a guilty plea’ means only that the defendant understands the maximum prison term and fine for the offense charged.” *Id.* (quoting *Ables v. Scott*, 73 F.3d 591, 592 n.2 (5th Cir. 1996)). That Parker understood both is reflected by the plea agreement that he signed. *See* Dkt. No. 49-19 at 13-18. So the state court’s rejection of any claim that Parker did not enter a voluntary guilty plea – and the rejection of a claim that his counsel violated Parker’s Sixth Amendment right to effective counsel related to the same – was not unreasonable.

Parker’s knowing and voluntary guilty plea further “constitutes a waiver of all non-jurisdictional defects in the prior proceedings.” *United States v. Bendicks*, 449 F.2d 313, 315 (5th Cir. 1971); *see also, e.g.*, *Norris v. McDonough*, No. 8:06-CV-0036-T-30TBM, 2007 WL 1655617, at *6 (M.D. Fla. June 6, 2007) (citing *Scott v. Wainwright*, 698 F.2d 427, 429 (11th Cir. 1983) (“Once a plea of guilty has been entered, nonjurisdictional challenges to the conviction’s constitutionality are waived, and only an attack on the voluntary and knowing nature of the plea can be sustained.” (citing *McMann v. Richardson*, 397 U.S. 759 (1970); *Bradbury v. Wainwright*, 658 F.2d 1083, 1087 (5th Cir. Unit B Oct. 1981)))).

These non-jurisdictional defects include Parker’s remaining (conclusory) ineffective-assistance-of-counsel (“IAC”) claims – that counsel failed to: challenge the

arrest; request a bond; challenge the search; appeal the drug-test result; challenge his prior conviction; notify the prosecution that Parker's prior conviction had been appealed). *See United States v. Palacios*, 928 F.3d 450, 455 (5th Cir. 2019) ("A voluntary guilty plea waives all nonjurisdictional defects in the proceedings against the defendant.' Moreover, '[s]olemn declarations in open court carry a strong presumption of verity.' Therefore, '[w]hen a criminal defendant has solemnly admitted in open court that he is in fact guilty of the offense with which he is charged, he may not thereafter raise independent claims relating to the deprivation of constitutional rights that occurred prior to the entry of the guilty plea.' This includes all IAC claims 'except insofar as the ineffectiveness is alleged to have rendered the guilty plea involuntary.'" (citations omitted)).

The valid guilty plea also constitutes a waiver of (1) Parker's claim that he is "probably innocent" and (2) his apparent challenge to the enhancement based on his prior conviction. *See, e.g., Smith v. McCotter*, 786 F.3d 697, 702-03 (5th Cir. 1986) ("The *Jackson v. Virginia*, 443 U.S. 307 (1979), mandate that sufficient evidence exist from which a rational fact finder could find guilt beyond a reasonable doubt is inapplicable to convictions based on a guilty plea." (citing *Kelley v. Alabama*, 636 F.2d 1082, 1083-84 (5th Cir. Unit B Feb. 1981) (per curiam)); *United States v. Silva*, 136 F.3d 136, 1998 WL 29992, at *1 (5th Cir. Jan. 6, 1998) (per curiam) ("Silva's sufficiency-of-the-evidence challenge is also waived by his guilty plea." (citing *United States v. Broome*, 628 F.2d 403, 405 (5th Cir. 1980); *Kelley*, 636 F.2d at 1083-84)).

And Parker's remaining claim – that he was subjected to excessive pre-trial

bail – is moot. *See Yohey v. Collins*, 985 F.2d 222, 228-29 (5th Cir. 1993) (“Yohey claims that the state court erred in refusing to grant his requests for pretrial habeas relief. However, such claims for federal habeas relief for pretrial issues are mooted by Yohey's subsequent conviction.” (citations omitted)).

Recommendation

The Court should deny the application for a writ of habeas corpus.

A copy of these findings, conclusions, and recommendation shall be served on all parties in the manner provided by law. Any party who objects to any part of these findings, conclusions, and recommendation must file specific written objections within 14 days after being served with a copy. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); FED. R. CIV. P. 72(b). In order to be specific, an objection must identify the specific finding or recommendation to which objection is made, state the basis for the objection, and specify the place in the magistrate judge's findings, conclusions, and recommendation where the disputed determination is found. An objection that merely incorporates by reference or refers to the briefing before the magistrate judge is not specific. Failure to file specific written objections will bar the aggrieved party from appealing the factual findings and legal conclusions of the magistrate judge that are accepted or adopted by the district court, except upon grounds of plain error. *See Douglass v. United Servs. Auto. Ass'n*, 79 F.3d 1415, 1417 (5th Cir. 1996).

DATED: July 9, 2020



DAVID L. HORAN
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE